

Reporting using grades: questions and answers for teachers

1. *What is the common grade scale?*

The common grade scale summarises the standard (or quality) of achievement associated with each grade, A–E. The scale describes:

- the depth of knowledge and understanding, and
 - the range of skills
- that students working at that standard typically show.

2. *How do I know what standard each of the grades represents?*

The Board of Studies is gathering samples of the work of real students who have done some syllabus-based tasks and activities. These work samples are published on the Board's Assessment Resource Centre website.

The work samples come from a range of schools throughout NSW. The samples have been aligned to grades by a number of experienced practising teachers on the basis that the sample displays characteristics of work typically produced by students performing at that standard at the end of the stage. Each work sample is accompanied by an explanation called a grade commentary, which helps in understanding the reasons why it was aligned to a particular grade.

The collections of work samples provided on the Assessment Resource Centre show the qualities in work typically produced by students who will receive each grade at the end of the stage.

Teachers become familiar with the standards by:

- reading the descriptions for each grade;
- examining the work samples, and
- considering carefully the grade commentary for each sample.

The grade commentaries are an important link between the work samples and the standards.

While considering the work samples, teachers can reflect on their experiences with other students who have produced work of a similar quality. This will give them a mental picture of the knowledge, skills and understanding represented by that grade. Discussions with colleagues will also be helpful in developing a clear understanding of the standards.

3. *How do I choose the right grade?*

Teachers weigh up the assessment information they have collected for each student **up to that point in time**. This information will come from both formal assessment activities and informal observations, and will be built up over time and in different situations.

Teachers can then compare their students' achievements with the standards represented by each grade, and make an on-balance professional judgement about the grade that is most appropriate to summarise each student's achievement.

Making a judgement about the grade that best matches each student's achievements requires teachers to make an on-balance judgement in relation to standards. This is a key professional skill. An on-balance judgement does not just focus on a single piece of work.

4. *What is the best way for teachers teaching the same stage to get a shared view of the standards for each subject?*

Discussions with colleagues about the common grade scale and the collection of work samples aligned to each grade on the Assessment Resource Centre website would be helpful. The grade commentaries for each sample describe some of the characteristics of the work sample that make it typical of the work produced by a student performing at that standard at the end of a stage.

5. *Will the Board of Studies produce course performance descriptors of standards for each course, as it has for Stage 5 courses?*

It is not intended that any subject-specific course performance descriptors will be developed for stages other than Stage 5. The common grade scale describes student performance at each of the five grade levels.

The Board of Studies requires schools to submit grades for each student at the end of Year 10, to be reported on the School Certificate. Subject-specific course performance descriptors have been developed for teachers to use in assigning School Certificate grades.

6. *Does a C grade mean the same in all schools?*

The common grade scale and the work samples on the Board's Assessment Resource Centre website provide the basis for schools in NSW, in each course and stage, to award grades based on the same standards.

As teachers become familiar with the standards and the support materials and engage in professional discussions with their colleagues greater levels of consistency can be expected.

7. *A student received the same grade in the yearly report as they did in their half-yearly report. Does this mean that they showed no improvement?*

If a student receives a Grade C, they have 'a sound knowledge and understanding of the main areas of content' and have 'achieved an adequate level of competence in the processes and skills' in the work they have covered to date.

If the student receives a Grade C at the next reporting point, they generally will have made progress. This is because between the two reporting periods the student will have learned **new** knowledge and skills of a **more challenging** nature, and will have demonstrated achievement matching the Grade C standard in relation to this new and more challenging material.

8. *Are there any limits on the number of As, Bs, etc that I can award?*

Teachers are **not** limited to set numbers of each grade within their class or school.

Grades are given for individual achievement. Students receive the grade that best matches the standard of their achievement. It is possible that there are classes in which all students demonstrate extensive or thorough knowledge and understanding of the content, and show very high or high levels of competence in processes and skills. It may be the case that only A and B grades are assigned in those groups. On the other hand, there may be some groups in which no students demonstrate ‘an extensive knowledge and understanding of the content’ or show ‘very high levels of competence in processes and skills’, so that the highest grade awarded may be a B or a C.

9. *Is it all right if I don’t give an E to any students in my class?*

Students are awarded the grade that is the best on-balance summary of their performance, and there are no predetermined numbers or percentages of grades to be awarded.

An E grade would be awarded to students who have demonstrated only ‘an elementary knowledge and understanding in few areas of the content’ and have achieved only ‘very limited competence in some of the processes and skills’.

Grades are awarded based on achievement, not effort or behaviour.

10. *How do I award grades part-way through a stage?*

At any time in a stage you can:

- compare student achievement with the standards represented by each grade and
- make an on-balance professional judgement and give the appropriate grade.

When reporting grades **before** the end of a stage:

- consider the knowledge and skills covered **up to that point in time**
- give the grade that **best matches the standard achieved so far**.

The full range of grades can be awarded at any point in the course or stage.

11. *What about special education needs students, or students on a special program of study? Do I have to award grades to them?*

Teachers should seek advice from their school or sector about any particular requirements for reporting the achievement of these students. Typically, teachers would not be required to award a grade in a subject where the student is on a special program of study in that subject.

12. *At my school, students are taught in stage groupings. How do I award grades?*

Students are sometimes grouped in different ways to meet a variety of different organisational and educational needs. Grades are given for individual achievement. Students should receive the grade that best matches the standard of their achievement. Teachers will need to consider for each student what would typically be expected of that student’s year group.

It must always be remembered that the grade awarded is only one element of reporting to parents, and the written comments and other information provided assist

by placing the grade in the context of the educational program the student has been undertaking.

13. *In my Year 3 class, one student is doing Stage 3 Mathematics. How should I award a grade to this student?*

Parents would probably find it most useful to have the grade awarded using the Stage 2 standards – presumably an A in this case – and further information about the student’s achievement and how they are being catered for could be provided in the report comments. However, if the Mathematics program for the student includes only the knowledge, skills and understanding of Stage 3 Mathematics, then it may be appropriate to assign a grade that reflects his/her achievement of Stage 3 knowledge, skills and understanding. In such cases, the parents would already be aware that the student was working on such a program. This would also need to be made clear on the report.

14. *In my Year 5 class, some students are having difficulties and have not yet achieved Stage 2 knowledge, skills and understanding. Do I award grades using Stage 3 standards or Stage 2?*

If the students are on a special program of study, and an adjustment has been made to their learning program, then teachers may not be required by their school or sector to award a grade. In other cases, grades would normally be awarded according to the standard appropriate to the students’ year group.

15. *How do I report achievement in Stage 5 Mathematics?*

For the purpose of awarding School Certificate grades in Mathematics, a finer grade scale is used, and each of the grades A to D is sub-divided into two levels. There is no requirement that this finer scale needs to be used at earlier reporting periods during Stage 5, and teachers can use the common grade scale across the whole of the year group, just as they do in other courses.

16. *Do I have to keep samples of my students’ work to justify the grades I have awarded?*

The Board of Studies does not require teachers to keep samples of student work for the purposes of awarding grades. Teachers make their professional judgement of the grade to be awarded based on the evidence they collect of their students’ achievement. This can be in a number of ways, including marks and grades. Teachers should follow the policies of their school/sector in relation to information that they record and/or retain.

17. *Can I pre-determine the number of grades awarded to students using our school’s performance on tests such as ELLA, SNAP and the Basic Skills Test?*

While students who perform well on these tests will typically be able to demonstrate performance at the higher grades, this may not always be the case. It must be remembered that these tests focus on particular areas of the curriculum – literacy, numeracy, and so on – while the grade awarded to a student in each subject represents a summary of their performance across the broader syllabus content.

18. *Can we use trends identified in our School Certificate results over the years to help determine the percentage of A, B, C etc we award in reports in the future?*

Schools should refer to the work samples on the Board's Assessment Resource Centre website to make sure that the grades they award are aligned to the standards illustrated by the samples.

The course performance descriptors used to award School Certificate grades are subject-specific elaborations of the common grade scale. It may be that the pattern of grades awarded in Stage 5 courses is similar to the pattern of School Certificate grades that the school has been awarding.

19. *What requirements does the Board of Studies have for reports to parents?*

The Board of Studies NSW does not mandate any requirements for reports to parents. That is a sector or school decision. The grades that students receive are only one aspect of a written report to parents and students, which will also contain written comments about the student's achievement, and other information about their participation at school. The school sector/school will provide details about the specific requirements and advice for assessing student achievement and reporting to parents.